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ABSTRACT

Times Beach, Missouri, a small town close to the Meramec River and about 25 miles from St. Louis, is now deserted due to contamination from dioxin, a contaminant generated during the production of some cleansers, herbicides, and pesticides. From November 30, 1982, until the end of January 1983, the "St. Louis Post-Dispatch" ran 55 articles about Times Beach over a period of 61 days. A study analyzed the content of this early coverage by examining government involvement, the effects on the people involved, and the role of the media in the disaster. Results showed that the "St. Louis Post-Dispatch" (1) did not fully realize its potential as an educator and communicator during the Times Beach disaster, due in part to the inherent limitations on disaster reporting and in part to its own apparent lack of initiative; (2) failed as a means of preparing the public by ignoring rather than investigating the initial warning signs of widespread dioxin contamination in Missouri; (3) did provide some mitigation, warning, and coping information in its coverage, but glossed over or omitted many of the issues that were imperative for a complete understanding of the disaster; (4) could have improved its fulfillment of the role of watchdog with an explanation of the relative risk of living in Times Beach; and (5) was most effective in the role of providing a mode for grieving or assuaging guilt. (Twenty-four notes are included.) (MS)

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The St. Louis Post-Dispatch and Early Coverage of Times Beach: Watchdog or Muted Trumpet?

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Presented at AEJMC Convention
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INTRODUCTION

It took almost four years to identify the toxin and another eight years for the state and federal governments to begin facing the problem. Today, 17 years later, there is no longer a town, but there are still unanswered questions concerning the contamination, effects and cleanup of dioxin in Times Beach, Missouri.

Times Beach got its name in the 1920s from a promotion campaign of the old *St. Louis Times*. The newspaper offered new subscribers specially priced 20-by-100 foot lots close to the Meramec River about 25 miles from St. Louis with each subscription. In the promotion several thousand lots were sold for $67.50 a month.

"The Beach" became one of several working-class spas along the Meramec. By commuter train or Model T, St. Louisans could escape from the summer heat and fish, swim or drink beer at a cottage by the river.

During the Depression years, the cottages began to turn into year-round housing. Times Beach became a city in 1957, but it never developed a business base to help provide for paved streets, sewers and adequate public buildings. Its rural charm included weeds and mosquito ponds and goats and chickens running loose.

By late 1982, Times Beach was home to about 2100 residents. But their homes became part of a disaster area when first a flood swept through the town and then an evacuation notice was issued due to the high levels of dioxin identified in the town.

Today, 1988, Times Beach is completely deserted except for deer, wild turkey and other animals. Once a household name because of its prominence in the national news, its name has been removed from the highway 44 exit

that used to lead to the town. The exit now ends at a stop sign, a steel fence and a large sign cautioning visitors to stay out of the area. To the side, a security guard stationed in a trailer makes certain people heed the caution. A few feet away, in front of the formerly popular, now closed, Galley West Centre restaurant, sits an Environmental Protection Agency information trailer with a staff of three who respond to inquiries from the public and the media about the town, the disaster that obliterated it and what the future may hold for former residents.

From the bridge on highway 44, overlooking the former town, observers can see deserted buildings and empty houses and trailers, some with curtains still hanging at the windows, testifying to the hasty departure. Winds blow through the remains of Times Beach and on across the busy expressway nearby, where thousands of vehicles pour into and out of St. Louis every day.

The trail of dioxin through Missouri that led to Times Beach can be traced back to 1971. That year, at least 10 people became ill and at least 66 horses and countless other animals died mysterious, lingering, painful deaths at several stables in the state, including Shenandoah Stables at Moscow Mills, Bubbling Springs Ranch near Fenton and Timberline Stables near New Bloomfield.

A local doctor, puzzled by the concentrated illnesses and deaths, brought soil samples to the Environmental Trace Substances Laboratory at the University of Missouri in Columbia (he later developed chloracne, a severe skin disorder which follows the handling of dioxin). The laboratory knew the substance had to be something organic, but the lab did not have the capabilities to make a definitive determination.[1] The samples were then sent to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

It was not until 1974 that the CDC determined the mysterious poison was 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-para-dioxin, the most toxic of the 75 dioxin compounds. Dioxin is a contaminant generated during the production of some cleansers, herbicides and pesticides, and wood preservatives. During the distillation process, dioxin-laden oils are left over. Its potentially dangerous effects on humans were — and still are — disputed. By the time the dioxin was identified, soil from the three stables had been dug up and used as fill material in two residential sites in Missouri.

In August of 1974, Dr. Coleman Carter of the CDC traced dioxin at one of the sites, Shenandoah Stables, to a chemical company, Northeastern Pharmaceutical and Chemical Co., (NEPACCO) in Verona, Missouri. At the plant he found a tank containing 4,300 gallons of waste heavily contaminated with dioxin. A waste hauler, Russell Bliss, who had been paid to get rid of some of the waste, sprayed the oil on the stable grounds to control dust.

In 1975 the CDC recommended that dioxin-contaminated soil be removed, but state and federal officials did not act on this recommendation. This was largely due to the erroneous suggestion in the CDC report that dioxin in soil degrades by one-half each year. No further public action followed for nearly five years.

In 1979, a former dock worker at NEPACCO called EPA's regional office with a tip that started the wheels moving once again. He said that dioxin from the plant had been dumped in southwestern Missouri. The EPA then began collecting and testing samples throughout Missouri. The EPA staff also began questioning the waste hauler as to where else he had sprayed and dumped the contaminated oil.

The results of the EPA's investigations were not released until October

27, 1982, when a public interest group, the Environmental Defense Fund in Washington, D.C., made public the agency's list of 14 confirmed and 41 suspected dioxin sites in Missouri. Times Beach was one of the 41 suspected sites. The next day a wire story identifying many of the toxic hot spots ran in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* along with a story by local reporters.

The disclosure made international news and was followed by a massive sampling campaign by the EPA.

On November 30, following a disclosure by the hauler Bliss that he had sprayed the streets of Times Beach for five summers from 1971 to 1976, EPA technicians began taking soil samples in the town. A week later, the situation was complicated further when the town was devastated by a flood as the Meramec River overflowed its banks.

On December 15, a resident, Laine Jumper, announced the findings of a private laboratory that had been paid by the town of Times Beach to test for dioxin. The tests identified dioxin in soil underneath the city's streets.

As residents were beginning to move back into their homes on December 23 following the flood, they were alarmed to learn that the Missouri Department of Health and the CDC recommended that the town be evacuated based on the high levels of dioxin found in the EPA's soil samples.

In February 1983, the EPA announced it would spend $33 million from the federal Superfund to buy all businesses and homes of the 2100 displaced residents. Since then, several plans for Times Beach have been proposed, including turning it into a central storage site for dioxin-contaminated soil, converting it into an airport and establishing a shelter for indigents there.

Research Review

In a situation like this, when the residents of an entire town are losing their homes and facing possible severe health problems, quick, accurate and complete information is of vital importance. Especially during the first stages of a disaster, the public needs answers to many questions — What is the extent of the damage? What is to be done? Where can help be found?

Most of the answers are derived from the media. The media, in fact, are the major source of public information for all natural and technological disasters and risks. They not only inform the public on the nature and extent of the hazard, but also help form public perceptions of what could or should be done to mitigate and prevent future hazards. As such, they are extremely influential in policy-making.[2]

Yet despite the importance put on the media's role, comparatively little research has been done on the media and disasters. Among the reported studies one finding is clear — the need for more research. The media have faced sharp criticism from disaster researchers for their reporting of such disasters as Three Mile Island and Love Canal.[3] The media have also identified their own weaknesses and limitations and raised many questions about disaster reporting that have yet to be answered.

In the studies examining the reporting of disasters and risks, three basic limitations to the effectiveness of the press have been stressed: the

traditional definition of news, the complex nature of the information and the reliance on official news sources.

Traditional definitions of news and traditional newsgathering practices tend to result in hazard coverage that is event-oriented. As such, it avoids long-range questions of planning, which play a significant role in mitigating the impact of both natural and man-made disasters and result in a lack of stories in the predictive or warning stages of disaster reporting.[4]

Traditional news reporting also tends to stress drama and conflict, often with the result of emphasizing individual helplessness in the face of disasters and fails to inform citizens that they, as individuals, do have policy decisions to make.[5]

According to the National Research Council in the proceedings on the Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media Workshop in 1979:

> The mass media have classified creeping disasters as "non-issues" — the mass media's implicit definition of news as timely, crisis-oriented, and important seems inadequate for long-term coverage of incremental change. As a result, drought, famine, and pollution — among other problems — linger on the periphery of attention.[6]

By calling attention to hazardous situations, the media can affect the direction of research, the formalization of regulations and the course of action. For instance, Lee Wilkins, in her study of the Bhopal accident, reported that an Indian journalist warned that the plant was ripe for disaster, but few paid attention to the warning.[7]

Similarly, in October 1978, a reporter for the *Niagara Gazette* wrote the first of a series of articles that traced the history of the contamination of Love Canal. As part of his research, he tested the level of

toxicity and published reports of heavy concentrations of about 15 chemicals. This prompted the State Department of Environmental Conservation to investigate the problem.[8]

The complex nature of the information makes it difficult to present a comprehensive picture. This is compounded by the fact that journalists covering hazards often have limited education and training in science. Moreover, editors with a gatekeeping function are often less well informed than their science reporters.[9] Also, as Edward Keller found in the press coverage of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, many reporters lack the necessary scientific expertise to ask the proper questions to get the pertinent information.[10] In addition, it is difficult for journalists to communicate the risk of hazards, such as dioxin, when even scientists can not agree on what that risk is.

But despite the fact that reporters may not have all the details, a majority of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Communication of Scientific Risk believed that the media should not practice self-censorship in risk situations. The report strongly suggested that it is far more dangerous to withhold information from the public than to disclose even sparse and inadequate information.[11]

Sources, however, may impede newsgathering through censorship in hazard situations. Scientists often insist on having all the facts before making information public, and public officials believe they are acting responsibly by withholding information that they feel might cause unnecessary panic.[12] Because of their limited scientific knowledge and difficulty in weighing the credibility of sources, many reporters fall back on industry and government press releases to explain the situation.[13] This is the third limitation on disaster reporting — the journalists' tendency to

rely on official sources while spending little time with others, such as the average citizen or physicians or outside experts.

According to the NRC workshop proceedings, the main information-gathering problems in disaster reporting are the inappropriate use of people with prestige and expertise but no special knowledge about disasters, the too-frequent use of the same people as information sources, and the misleading representation of some news people as experts themselves.[14]

Wilkins found that the Bhopal disaster was covered "in much the same way as more traditional stories are reported — relying on government and corporate officials for the bulk of information and turning to less traditional, though arguably more knowledgeable, sources less frequently.[15]

Concerning the Three Mile Island disaster, Sharon Friedman reported that "source use was one of the major failings of the reporters interviewed, in that they rarely turned to anyone other than Met Ed itself for explanations of events."[16]

Now that key problem areas in disaster reporting have been identified by some studies, the challenge is for the media and hazard researchers to further analyze disaster reporting in order to improve the media's role as public educator and communicator in the face of disaster.

The NRC workshop summed up the mobilizing potential of disaster reporting:

> The relationship between disaster reporting and developing public concerns may be best understood as an aspect of the extraordinary mobilization of resources. A spate of disaster stories helps mobilize people. The media can transform the progress of an epidemic into an impending disaster when they focus attention on the event. This mobilizing function of disaster

> reporting also is noticeable in the postdisaster activity to determine causes and fix blame and responsibility. The part played by the media in this process, including their potential influences on the adoption of remedial measures, strikes as potentially the most productive area of research. In this regard, studies of past disasters through content analysis would be highly useful.[17]

The committee also described the mix of roles the media can play in disasters:

1. preparing the public to meet emergencies
2. providing mitigation, warning and coping information
3. providing reassurance and a mode for grieving or assuaging guilt in the aftermath of the tragedy
4. providing mobilizing information
5. assessing the postdisaster period and the lessons that have been learned; and
6. providing a record of activities related to the event.[18]

Using content analysis, this paper assesses how effectively the early coverage by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* of the Times Beach evacuation fulfilled the first four roles identified by the National Research Council.

The analysis also identifies the themes that ran through the coverage and examines the sources used by the *Post-Dispatch* as the story of Times Beach unfolded.

The content analysis focuses on all news articles in the *Post-Dispatch* from the time illegally dumped dioxin-contaminated wastes were first discovered in Missouri (May 1980) through the end of January 1983. By this time, the initial shock of the contamination and evacuation was over and the politics of what to do with the town had begun.

Content Analysis of Early Coverage

After years of minimal wire service coverage of dioxin in Missouri, the *Post-Dispatch* reported almost daily on the issue beginning October 28, 1982.

Times Beach was covered extensively from the first mention on November 30, 1982 until the end of January 1983. Fifty-five articles ran over a period of 61 days (the paper was not put out on Christmas or New Year's Day). Thirty of those articles appeared on the front page and about one-half of the stories had at least one accompanying illustration.

All stories during the period analyzed were written by *Post-Dispatch* staff. At the same time, Times Beach was on the front page of major newspapers across the country, the featured story in national news magazines and a regular item on the nightly television news.

The first three articles before contamination was confirmed in Times Beach by the EPA contained many questions but little of real news substance. The November 30 article mentioning Times Beach was primarily a recap of a meeting held the night before explaining to residents how and why the samples were to be taken in their town. The other two articles in that initial period concentrated on the frustration residents felt at not getting more complete information from the government. The residents wondered whether they should try and rebuild their homes after the flood and called on the EPA to "speed up their results and do what they can." [19]

The most dramatic package — four articles, three of them on the front page, four illustrations and an extra-bold banner headline — appeared on December 24, the day the CDC urged the evacuation.

The first of these articles, titled "Times Beach Evacuation Urged," was a straight news story announcing the CDC's recommendation to local residents. The article also contained some reactions from Times Beach city officials, background history on the issue and a short explanation of the health hazards: "Dioxin causes a severe skin disorder called chloracne. Tests on animals show that it also can cause cancer, birth defects and diseases of the nerves, liver, kidneys and bladder. But such effects on humans have not been established." This paragraph, which cited no source, was used over and over in the early coverage. Apparently little attempt was made to expand further on the definition since this exact paragraph was repeated in successive stories.

The next article, "Warning Fails To Stop Town's Christmas Party," focused on the people involved and elicited some sympathy from readers: "While parents caught up on news, children scampered between folding chairs and tables and played with new toys — the only ones many of them will get this Christmas." Residents were busy cleaning up after the flood and reacting to the news that they should evacuate the town. The article gave a glimpse into the disrupted lives of the people. It described the community's party at "one of the few clean buildings in town, City Hall" and expressed the pain and confusion of some of the residents. The article also repeated the lyrics to a song sung by one resident at the party about his frustrations with the government.

Accompanying these articles was one fairly comprehensive story on the background of toxic waste site evacuations across the country, the danger that flooding may have spread the contamination and the EPA's anger about not being involved in the evacuation decision. The last article contained some very useful precautions that residents who chose to stay could

follow, such as wearing gloves when in contact with soil and using dust-filter masks.

For the next few days, the articles reflected the confusion and frustration and lack of concrete answers at the time.

On December 26, the article "Little But Pride Left Along 'The Beach'" gave slight attention to the dioxin problem, focusing instead on the town's decision in the past not to have a federal flood insurance plan.

Due to the lack of new information, the rest of the articles between December 26 and December 29 restated over and over the EPA's decision to begin testing again and the anger of residents over all the "tentative" plans and lack of conclusive evidence. As the mayor of Times Beach said in the December 27 article, "No one from the EPA has officially told us we've got a problem here."

Many of the article during these days were summaries of public meetings.

Over the next few days, some fresh news crept back into the coverage. The paper reported on the progress of aid to residents and cleanup efforts, new sampling plans and the governor's accusation that the EPA, Federal Emergency Management Agency and CDC were "dragging their feet on offering help to Times Beach."

The last two paragraphs of a January 3 article described the delay a Times Beach couple had in moving into FEMA-provided housing due to a foul-up in paperwork.

On January 4, the paper reported FEMA's decision to remove the flood debris piled about the town. During the next week of coverage, the majority of articles concentrated on the difficulty of getting a landfill to accept the debris. The articles expressed the fears of residents living near

the proposed landfill but paid scant attention to the fears of those living in a town filled with debris that had become a breeding ground for rodents and bacteria.

Throughout this week the *Post-Dispatch* also ran short reports on the government's proposed plans for cleanup, the state and residents' complaints of the slow progress and summaries of town meetings.

During this time, however, two articles offered new insight into the issue. A January 9 article profiled Lee M. Thomas, the acting deputy director of FEMA, who was handling the Times Beach emergency. The article included his background, qualifications and personal interest in the job. Another January 9 article, "'Eyes Of The World' On Times Beach Problems," for the first time touched on how all the negative publicity had affected the residents' lives, in addition to tourism in the St. Louis area. The lack of public understanding of the issue was pointed out in the story by an account of some residents who said they had been asked if dioxin contamination was contagious.

The rest of the articles through January reflected the general lack of additional news from the government agencies involved. The *Post-Dispatch* took this opportunity to spend more time on the actions and feelings of individuals. Though many of the stories, again, were recounts of meetings in which residents vented their frustrations, people became even more of a focus than before. Most residents had moved to other areas. The town was virtually closed down. A January 12 article quoted some of the remaining residents and painted a picture of the "eerie silence" of this "ghost town" in which there were more EPA technicians in protective moon suits and masks than residents.

An article in late January, titled "Times Beach Torment: 'Disaster

Trauma,'" described the medically documented emotional, social and psychological costs for survivors of disasters. Interspersed throughout the informative article were paragraphs on the anguish of some residents, like that of Penny Capstick:

> She frets about whether she did the right thing in bringing her 7-year-old daughter back to flood-ravaged, dioxin-haunted Times Beach. She worries about her husband, who is angry at God. Sometimes, she can't sleep at night. Sometimes, she cries. Every day, she gets a little angrier at the forces that seem to conspire against her home, her family and their future.

An accompanying article described the effects disasters can have on children and used one Times Beach child, Angela Capstick, as an example. The article outlined the warning signs of distress that parents should be watchful for.

On the last day of January another personal account was reported, this one of a retired couple who had moved to Times Beach and started a flower business only to have it destroyed by the flood and the evacuation.

Other articles in the last two weeks of January concentrated on the efforts of a contigent of Times Beach residents who went to Washington, D.C. in an attempt to speed up the cleanup and buy-out of the town.

Preparing the Public to Meet Emergencies

The NRC, in the workshop proceedings, suggested that the initial role of the media in a disaster was to help the public prepare to meet the emergency. In the case of Times Beach, the preparation stage was the years leading up to the evacuation notice in which the clues to widespread dioxin contamination and the link to this Missouri town were slowly being uncovered.

As noted above, Times Beach was not mentioned in the *Post-Dispatch*

until November 30, 1982, when a front page story announced "EPA Tests Times Beach Streets For Dioxin." The story reported on a meeting held the night before. Prior to this, the paper had given its readers no clue that Times Beach was being investigated. The article concentrated on how and why the EPA was taking samples in the town and gave an overview of the trail of dioxin contamination throughout the state. But the article contained no specifics on the risks of dioxin, what the residents could do if dioxin were present or what kind of help they could expect. The best they got was a statement within the story from an EPA offical saying he hoped dioxin wouldn't be found because they weren't sure how they would clean it up. This article gave residents no information they could use to prepare for the possible emergency.

The next article, on December 1, described how residents were seeking private testing for dioxin contamination. The residents were finding it necessary to seek private help in preparing for an emergency because they were not getting the necessary information from any other source. Meanwhile, nature added both to the confusion and the anxiety. A week after the EPA began taking soil samples, most of the town was under water from flooding of the Meramec River.

On December 16, an article stated that the results of the private test showed "potentially harmful levels of dioxin." But the residents were still without any definite information because the EPA had yet to confirm the presence of dioxin. As one resident said, "We do have dioxin contamination in Times Beach. We'd like to call on the EPA to speed up their results and do what they can." Other residents were wondering whether to move back into their homes after the flooding.

It is interesting to note that, up to this point, the articles had called

dioxin "one of the most deadly substances known to man." From this article on, dioxin was a substance that "may cause" illness in humans.

Providing Mitigation, Warning and Coping Information

To mitigate and cope with a disaster, victims need accurate and extensive information as soon as possible so that they can understand the immediate situation, learn how to deal with it and realize what the future holds.

The *Post-Dispatch* articles that fulfilled this role were those that gave clear pictures of the situation, provided detailed explanations of the issues and included guidelines that individuals could follow to lessen the danger.

The December 24 article, "Times Beach Evaucation Urged," was the first with any substantive information about Times Beach. The article outlined the CDC's recommendation and the reasons for it. It also included information on the parts per billion found, how the dioxin got there and the possibility that the flood may have either spread or diluted the toxin, and a short paragraph on what dioxin is and its possible health effects. The information was by no means complete, but presumably it was all that was available at the time. The staff at the governor's office "stressed the preliminary nature of the test results" but were quoted as saying that the governor felt it better to release what information was available even if it were not complete.

This was one of the *Post-Dispatch's* more comprehensive articles about the dioxin issue and Times Beach. Eight subsequent articles gave sufficient new information to help residents understand and cope with the situation, including two more on the 24th. One fairly comprehensive one,

"Action Would Be Largest Of Kind," discussed the need for a new round of sampling after the flood. It also warned residents who were cleaning up that they could be exposing themselves to greater risk.

The other article, "Times Beach Residents Urged To Follow Dioxin Precautions" listed the precautions that residents could easily take to decrease exposure as outlined by state and federal health officials.

An article on December 31 provided the results to more EPA testing. It reported that dioxin was not concentrated in a few areas, but spread throughout the town. It also described the draft plans for a major retesting program by the EPA.

On January 6, the *Post-Dispatch* provided a map that clearly showed the levels of contamination on the various streets in the town.

On the last two days of January, two articles appeared with useful information for businessmen concerning the use of "economic-injury disaster" loans from the Small Business Association. While the first article was a bit misleading, saying only that the money could not be used for physically repairing or rebuilding businesses, the next article explained that it could only be used for rebuilding if they built out of the flood plain or enrolled in a flood insurance program.

The two December 17 articles, "Times Beach Torment: 'Disaster Trauma'" and "Disasters May Mar Children's Personalities" contained information from mental health experts on how victims of disaster cope with trauma. It also had the potential of mitigating trauma by letting the victims know what they were experiencing and why.

Providing Reassurance and a Mode for Grieving or Assuaging Guilt in the Aftermath of the Tragedy.

The early coverage by the *Post-Dispatch* contained little of a

reassuring nature, but it did provide a mode for grieving and assuaging guilt by giving victims a place to vent their fears and frustrations.

During the early period, the information provided by the paper included only tentative details on the amount of exposure to dioxin and its health effects, the aid available to the residents and the possibility of a buy-out or rebuilding of the town. The only reassurance that the victims could derive from the paper was the fact that they were not alone in the suffering.

However, the January 17 article on disaster trauma not only let people know that others were suffering, perhaps more than they, but also reassured them that it was to be expected and that counseling was available.

On the other hand, one positive article on December 31 may have reassured some that things were not as bad as they could be and that they, too, had the strength to overcome the tragedy. The article, "Couple Defer Aid To 'Someone Needy,'" was about a couple who, after being displaced from Times Beach, were living in a camper parked in the driveway of friends. They refused government aid because, as one said, "When I heard there was a Times Beach family with children living in a car, I knew I did not need the government's temporary housing." They went on to say, "If you say anything in the papers, say we appreciate all that FEMA, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Wallach family and so many others have done . . . ."

An article on January 9 had the potential for reassuring residents who held the popular belief that government officals did not really care about them. The article, "Making Sure U.S. Aid Isn't a Disaster Itself," was a very positive profile on Lee M. Thomas, new acting deputy director of FEMA, and his concerns for the people. The article reassured residents that "He knows

how frustrating and bewildering bureaucracy can be" and that "He understands their problems."

These personal stories could also give the people of Times Beach a means of grieving for their neighbors and themselves. Every resident had his or her own story of loss, such as the one on the last day of January, "Floods, Dioxin Kill Flower Enterprise," about a retired couple who couldn't find anyone to come into town and rebuild their greenhouses. In the article, Mrs. Weida lamented, "When we moved out here to Times Beach nine years ago, it looked like an ideal place. All we wanted to do was grow our flowers and plants. We both always loved flowers." This article gave residents the chance to grieve with these neighbors. By identifying with their sense of loss, it also gave them an opportunity to grieve for their own losses. The same could be said about the December 29 article, "Fearful Residents Link Their Ills To Dioxin," in which several residents described the severe illness they and their family members had endured, possibly, they thought, due to the poison in their town.

The assuaging of guilt was best served by the paper when it reported on the residents' criticisms and frustrations of the government's handling of the contamination. Starting with the December 24 article, "Warning Fails To Stop Town's Christmas Party," in which one resident was quoted as saying, "Why didn't they do this in '74? Now all of a sudden we've had a flood and they're going to kick us when we're down." Several subsequent articles gave residents a chance to transfer all blame and guilt onto the government. Most of these stories were reports of long meetings the night before between residents of Times Beach and nearby towns and government officials.

Providing Mobilizing Information

Simply by focusing attention on an issue, the press can affect the nature of regulation, the course of litigation or the direction of research and action. It can also provide pertinent information to help those involved organize to deal with the emergency.

The most obvious way in which the *Post-Dispatch* could have helped to mobilize residents and neighbors of the town was by announcing upcoming meetings in the paper. However, only one article, on December 28, did this. Most articles concerning meetings were reports of ones that had already taken place.

Several articles in the early coverage provided quick bits of specific mobilizing information. A December 31 article told residents with health problems where to register and also gave an address for all displaced residents to write with their new addresses so that everyone could be kept track of for health survey reasons. At the end of an article on January 4, a telephone number for FEMA was given for anyone with housing to rent to Times Beach residents to call.

On January 10 and 11, two articles contained organizational information on a health survey to begin on January 12. Dates, times, location and special instructions were provided.

Another way the paper potentially helped residents mobilize was by reporting local plans to organize demonstrations and such. For instance, in an article on January 13, a city alderman said that since the government was not acting fast enough, the residents would arrange a demonstration that weekend. Three days later, the *Post-Dispatch* reported that "about 100 people protested along Highway 44 at Times Beach protesting the lack of action by the federal government and demanding that the federal

government buy their homes." It is difficult to say whether reports such as these helped mobilize the government into quicker action, but the potential was certainly there. Similarly, the day after the *Post-Dispatch* reported that the mayor of Times Beach said they would burn the town's debris if the government did not do something with it soon, FEMA decided to remove the debris. In both cases the town communicated its frustrations to the media, and government agencies responded following publication of the comments.

Results

The *Post-Dispatch* did not fully realize its potential as an educator and communicator during the Times Beach disaster, due in part to the inherent limitations on disaster reporting cited earlier and in part to its own apparent lack of initiative.

As a means of preparing the public to meet emergencies, the *Post-Dispatch* failed by ignoring rather than investigating the initial warning signs of widespread dioxin contamination in Missouri. The issue began as a "creeping non-issue," the type that receives scant attention in traditional news practices, but the clues were there for an alert local reporter who was following the issue to uncover the big story.

One employee of the *Post-Dispatch* said that in 1980 she took it upon herself to investigate the plant in Verona. However, she was told by her editor to let the beat reporter handle it, and it was pursued no further for a time.

The *Post-Dispatch* did not pick up on the story on Times Beach, and dioxin contamination throughout the entire state, until it became national news with the release of a list of the locations of confirmed and suspected contaminated sites in the state by the Environmental Defense Fund. Up to that point, the *Post-Dispatch* simply carried wire service accounts.The warning signs of a possible hazard in the state were clear as early as 1974 when the poison at Shenandoah Stables was identified as dioxin. Another warning came in 1980 with the first discovery of buried dioxin waste in the state.

The source of the dioxin, the chemical plant NEPACCO, was known to produce hexachlorene, of which dioxin is a byproduct.

In addition, the owners of Shenandoah Stables, after learning that dioxin caused the deaths of the horses, followed the waste-oil sprayer, Bliss, and compiled a list of other sites where he had sprayed the dioxin-contaminated oil and reported those to government agencies.

The *Post-Dispatch* did provide some mitigation, warning and coping information in its coverage, but many of the issues that were imperative for a complete understanding of the disaster were omitted or merely glossed over. For instance, a December 28 article quoted a resident asking, "Why is it so dangerous now but it wasn't before? Nothing's happened to us." This would have been a good opportunity for a reporter to use outside experts and documents to explain incubation periods, previous studies of people exposed to dioxin and the known mitigating effects of environmental factors on the toxin.

A variety of other issues warranted, but did not receive, investigation such as a clear explanation of the Superfund process that made the buy-out of the town possible, an outline of the laws and regulations

governing toxic waste disposal in Missouri, the success in finding housing for displaced residents and a discussion of the insolubility of dioxin, which prevents it from being washed downstream to contaminate other areas.

The *Post-Dispatch* could have improved its fulfillment of the role of watchdog with an explanation of the relative risk of living in Times Beach. Such information would have been beneficial early in the coverage. Granted, it is difficult for journalists to communicate the risk of dioxin when scientists can not agree on what that risk is. The *Post-Dispatch* did, however, run an informative article on November 13, 1983, that ranked dioxin on a scale of risks. According to a dioxin expert at EPA quoted in the article, living near a copper smelter or attending a school with asbestos building materials, among other cases, might be more dangerous than living in Times Beach. This article perhaps could have been more effective in mitigating the trauma and helping residents cope if documented information of this kind had been made available earlier.

Full understanding of the extent of the disaster also would have benefitted from more articles detailing how individuals were affected and how they were coping.

In July of 1983, Mayor Marilyn L. Leistner berated the press for its poor job of communicating what the disaster had actually done to the lives of the people. She cited several cases that the paper failed to report — businessmen who were longtime friends refused to shake hands, cleaning businesses refused to accept their clothing and an entire restaurant emptied out when a Times Beach resident was recognized.[20]

This ostracism was alluded to, but again not pursued, by the *Post-Dispatch* in an article on January 4. The article, entitled "City

Officials To Seek Out People Who Moved In From Times Beach," concerned the call by St. Louis health officials for Times Beach residents in the city to have their furnishings checked for dioxin contamination. The last paragraph quoted one official as saying, "The call from one Times Beach family made city officials aware that a number of Times Beach residents had taken refuge in the city." The article made the former residents of the town sound like lepers. It included no explanation of whether clothes might in fact be contaminated and whether residents should dispose of possessions.

The *Post-Dispatch* was most effective in the role of providing a mode for grieving or assuaging guilt. The paper ran numerous stories in which city officials and residents expressed their concerns and fears.

Overall, the quantity of coverage was impressive, but the quality was not. The reporting was solid and steady but, for the most part, superficial and incomplete.

Though the last few weeks of the early coverage focused on people, the human element was conspicuously missing from much of the reporting. The *Post-Dispatch* went for the authority viewpoint and gave less attention to the people involved. This was a particularly crucial omission in the *Post-Dispatch* because its readers were neighbors, friends, fellow employees and relatives of the victims of this disaster.

The paper also missed the big story — why the state and federal governments had dragged their feet in responding to this issue. The presence of dioxin in Missouri was known for more than eight years before many living near it were warned. The EPA and the state did not disclose what they had learned — that high concentrations of dioxin were present in various sites in Missouri — from 1974 to 1982. The sites were pinpointed

but the residents not warned. It took a leak of the information by a private environmental group to make the information public.

After the December 24 warning, the EPA staff reported that they had talked to Bliss to find out where the dioxin had been sprayed and in what concentrations. Then on November 1, the *Post-Dispatch* reported that the EPA admitted to never having talked to Bliss, but the paper failed to look into why the EPA had told less than the whole truth.

In the January 7 article, "Reagan Calls For Flood-Dioxin Task Force," the paper reported that some "off-the-record discord has been expressed occasionally between the EPA and the Centers for Disease Control." It went on to say that the EPA "appeared to be irked" that it had not been alerted about the health agency's warning to the residents before it was issued. This tension between the two agencies is another indication of the inefficiency of the handling of the problem that the paper did not investigate. Many of the articles reflected the frustrations of residents with the incompetence and callousness of some government agencies, but these early articles did not help to relieve that frustration with answers.

The quality of coverage suffered from the *Post-Dispatch's* habitual reliance on certain sources. As with most disaster reporting, the paper turned most often to the readily-available government officials and press releases from the agencies involved. It relied most heavily on the EPA, the CDC, the state Department of Natural Resources and FEMA. Apparently, no outside expert on toxicology was contacted, yet many are available, for example, through a call to the 800 number of the Scientists' Institute for Public Information. The superficial discussions of dioxin and its effects suggest that no document research was used by the reporters, even though a data base search might have alerted them to pertinent information

sources. It seems the paper was content to merely summarize the facts handed out by the "official sources" with little or no attempt at investigative reporting.

Conclusions

James Carey has said that "Journalism is a daybook that records the significant happenings of that day."[21] As a recorder of events, the *Post-Dispatch* did a fair job. But it is the story behind the story, like that which Times Beach finally came to symbolize, that is more difficult to ferret out and present in a clear, concise form. Readers want not just to know, but to understand. Without the in-depth, background story, the public can never fully understand the problem, and, consequently, the ability to cope with, mitigate and perhaps prevent disasters is impaired.

In the *Post-Dispatch's* early coverage of Times Beach, the "facts" were presented, day after day. But the paper missed what Carey has called the "dark continent" of American journalism: the how and why.[22] By failing to investigate the clues as the hazard developed for more than a decade, the reporters did not question how these seemingly isolated cases of dioxin contamination throughout the state might translate into widespread disaster.

Once the story broke and the *Post-Dispatch* jumped on the bandwagon, its early coverage neglected the whys of the issue — Why had not the information been released publicly sooner? Why was the government taking so long to come up with concrete solutions? Why were the government agencies charged with handling the problem arguing amongst themselves and, at times, not telling the whole truth?

The media are often criticized for ignoring the deeper issues of how and why and for focusing on a single event rather than- stories that develop over time. Granted, it is infinitely more difficult to report on "the news that oozes" as compared to "the news that breaks."[23] The former requires more time and committment by editors to the investment of staff time, energies and, sometimes, funds. This might be alleviated somewhat if reporters were less dependent on official sources and could be free to follow clues that might enable the media to alert the public before a story "breaks." As many media researchers have noted, who a reporter talks to determines to a large extent what will be reported and how.

The knowledgeability of the reporter is also a determinant, especially in highly complex and emotional issues such as disasters. In order to do a better job in reporting on risks and disasters, journalists need to be better educated about scientific methods and the nature of technological risk. Journalists also should be informed on how to deal compassionately with people experiencing shock or terrible grief.

One participant in the NRC workshop on disasters, Everett C. Parker, suggested that because disasters are becoming increasingly common and because the new kinds of disasters that occur pose new challenges, it is time for journalism schools to develop curricula and train people to be skillful, compassionate disaster reporters.[24] Findings from this study support that assessment.

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